



And the

BAND PLAYS ON

*It was the first — and last —
all-female Air Force band*

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts photos by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

At age 80,
Annie Everitt
was the eldest
member at last
year's Women
in the Air Force
Band reunion.
Annie is a
trombone player
and was the
band's alternate
conductor.

After the Women's Armed Services Integration Act went into effect in 1948, more women needed to be enticed into joining the recently formed Air Force as permanent, regular members.

Hoping to drum up more interest, the Women in the Air Force Band was formed in 1951 and spent the next 10 years logging more than 500,000 miles performing in front of students and troops everywhere from the Arctic Circle to Puerto Rico before being disbanded.

But it was slow going in the beginning. Male bands had been firmly entrenched in military heritage for decades, but a female band had to be built from scratch. Notices were posted in basic training barracks for women who could play a musical instrument.

Phoebe Smithback was among thousands of basic trainees stretching Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, to the seams in 1951 prior to the start of the Korean War. She auditioned even though she hadn't touched a baritone in five years.

When Ms. Smithback, who was slated for a career in radar electronics, finished playing, the male band member who auditioned her said she could be in the band. "What band?" she recalled replying.

This past October, Ms. Smithback joined 53 former WAF band members in Dallas for their eighth reunion.

Unlike most reunions where the focus is on sharing fond memories, these ladies showed up armed with oboes, clarinets and trombones ready to pick up where they left off more than 40 years ago. After a few days of intense rehearsal, band members ranging in age from 62 to 80 headed to the State Fair of Texas to perform near the same venue where many of them performed in 1954.

"It sounds like the devil. You think, 'Oh my God, it'll never happen,'" Sharon Harper said of that first rehearsal at each year's reunion. And though their

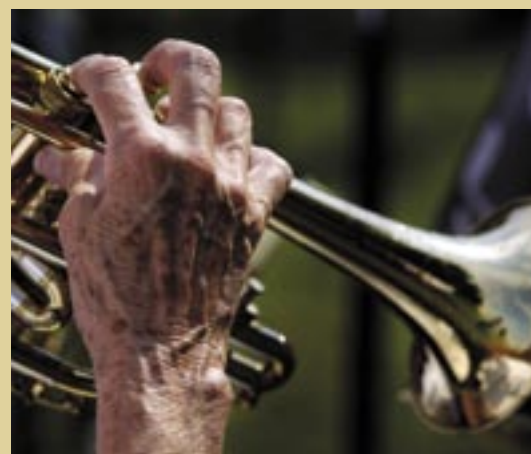
movement has slowed and their appearance has altered over the years ("Thank God for name tags," quipped Annie Everitt, the band's senior statesman at 80), their sound is still vibrant and appreciated by state fair listeners. They included Lowell Worthington, a 71-year-old former Army sergeant from Carrollton, Texas, who was a 19-year-old engineer during the Korean War.

"I think it was exciting to see them so full of life. I think it just helps bring us together — democrats and republicans — and to cheer on old values," said the psychologist after the morning performance. He planned to be back for the afternoon session.

Band of sisters

Their music is also good medicine for band members.

"I'm 20 years old again for the week," said Ms. Smithback, a 78-year-old former technical sergeant.



More than 50 band members (right) gathered at the State Fair in Dallas this past fall to celebrate and rekindle memories of the only and last all-female band in the Air Force. Jude Garcia (bottom left), WAF member and clarinet player, performs at the Dallas Veteran's Administration Hospital. This year's reunion was the band's eighth.

She was No. 23 of the 235 women who served during the band's decade-long existence, and she's one of few who served from beginning to end.

The band averaged about 50 musicians, but their ranks were constantly thinned due to marriage or those opting to cross-train or separate after a few years on the road.

They were on the road about 80 percent of the time performing at school concerts, the Kentucky Derby, the Orange Parade, presidential inauguration parades, Mardi Gras, radio, television, and many less glamorous locations wherever young Airmen could be found. Their trips ranged from traveling in the back of a convertible and staying in a nice hotel to long, hot bus rides and being lodged in a stockade, said Sandee McClammy, a baritone player from Mesquite, Texas. She was in the band from 1954 to 1956 before cross-training as a personnel technician.

She recalled a long, bumpy ride in the back of

a C-47 to Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska. Despite the wear and tear of travel and having to wear a parachute, Ms. McClammy said the band's revered director, Capt. Mary Belle Nissly, demanded an impeccable appearance at all times. Shoes had to be shined so lustroously the owner could see the reflection of her face. Skirts were starched so heavily they could stand by themselves. Performances were sometimes conducted standing up so as not to wrinkle their blue and white seersucker uniforms. Other uniform combinations included dress whites, dress blue pants with the Ike jacket, and dress blues in winter. So when their plane finally touched down in the Alaskan outback, out marched 50 snappily dressed and smiling musicians to the tune of "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody," being played by the base's male band.

After performing for the troops, band members were expected to socialize with the audience,



A Texas-sized crowd of more than 800 enjoys the music of the former Women in the Air Force Band. After a decade of entertaining students and troops around the world, the band was deactivated in 1961. More than 200 women were members of the original band.

which meant dancing. For Ms. McClammy, she said it meant wearing her sturdy Li'l Abner high-top shoes to protect her toes from Fred Astaire wannabes.

On a high note

"This band was a hit wherever it went ... we were special. We still are special," said Ms. Harper. She joined as an 18-year-old when a wave of patriotism came over her during a recruiter's visit to her high school toward the end of the Korean War. Plus, she added with a smile, she knew that Air Force blues would set off her blond hair and blue eyes.

The young clarinet player said she loved the feeling of making people happy with their music, but the band also competed with her love of softball, which she wasn't allowed to play as a band

member because of risk of injury to her hands. She also cross-trained and became a clerk — one of the "girlie career fields" she had hoped to avoid by joining the band. She got out of the Air Force in 1958 to raise a family, but her love of wearing Air Force blues never faded.

"If the Air Force would take me back today, I would," said Ms. Harper, who retired in 2000 as a rural postal carrier. Not one to relish retirement, she was glad the reunion committee persevered in tracking her down. For the record, 149 band members have been contacted, 32 have died and 54 remain missing.

"We got to get them back into the fold," Ms. Harper said. How much longer the fold will keep gathering and performing is decided at the conclusion of each reunion. Some vote to stop now. She disagrees. "God gave us this talent, and if we

don't use it as long as possible, it's wasted."

It seems certain that Ms. Everitt and her trombone will remain poised to perform as long as humanly possible. Unlike many of her fellow band members who hadn't picked up an instrument in years, the 80-year-old wit never stopped. In addition to her daily 8-mile bike ride, the former master sergeant puts in about 45 minutes to an hour of practice.

She's been hooked on music ever since she dragged down her grandfather's trombone from the attic. She was only a seventh-grader and managed to extract a loud noise from it in the family kitchen, to which her uncle replied, "You know, I think she's going to play this." She did so for nine years in the WAF Band, often to the delight of children by using her trombone as a comedic device to hook people with its long slide.

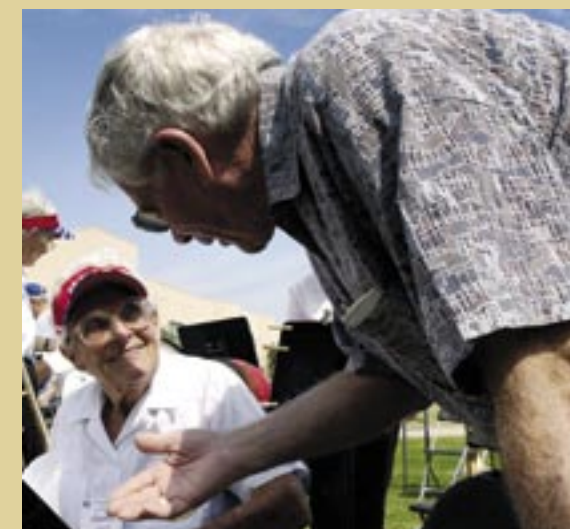
However, she takes on a serious note about their place in military musical history. Until their first reunion in 1997 in San Antonio, their legacy had been largely forgotten, she said. "It was just left to bury itself."

That scenario doesn't seem likely to play out again, however, because band members have had the opportunity to look back and realize being part of the band was a significant chapter in their lives. Through reunions, they're able to tap into something special, Ms. McClammy said after their concluding song brought the crowd to its feet.

"You need to play and you need to play with other people," Ms. McClammy told a local reporter after the concert. And doing so before enthusiastic crowds and appreciative veterans who remember them from the old days makes it even better. "What we feel, we see in their faces." ♫

Situated in the shadows of Old Glory,

members of the percussion section prepare their sheet music prior to a performance. Although time has changed their appearance, these proud patriots still "wow" audiences with their music — just as they did more than 40 years ago.



Band members (above) gathered from across the United States for a week-long tour in Dallas this past fall. During the band's existence, the women played at various venues including parades and concerts, including marching in the Rose Bowl parade and playing for President Dwight Eisenhower. Annie Everitt (left), the eldest member of the band, is thanked by an audience member following a concert. Ms. Everitt, a former master sergeant, remains committed to playing her trombone as long as she possibly can.